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SUBJECT: PROMINENT FORMER OPPOSITION LEADER TURAJONZODA SHARES VIEWS
ON KEY ISSUES, TAJIKISTAN'S UNCERTAIN FUTURE

REF: A. DUSHANBE 347
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CLASSIFIED BY: Matt Purl, A/DCM, POL, DOS.

REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

11. (C) Summary: On July 30, Embassy PolOffs and two DRL representatives met with Hoji Akbar Turajonzoda, a charismatic religious leader who was among the top leaders of the United Tajik Opposition during Tajikistan's civil war. Despite his continued harsh criticism of President Rahmon, Turajonzoda now serves as a presidentially appointed Deputy in Tajikistan's Majlisi Milli (upper house of Parliament), and was Deputy Prime Minister from 1998-2005. Turajonzoda gave his views on recent violence in the Rasht Valley, the status of religious freedom, and the prospects for democratic reform in Tajikistan. He predicted the government's actions to restrict Islamic religious practice would increase religious extremism and political instability in Tajikistan, and said the United States could do its part to keep extremism in check by reaching out to Islamic leaders across the country. End summary.

WHO IS HOJI AKBAR TURAJONZODA?

12. (C) Turajonzoda was the Qazi Qalon, the highest Islamic authority in Tajikistan, from 1988-1991. During the Tajik civil war from 1992-1997, he commanded the United Tajik Opposition (UTO) primarily from Afghanistan and Iran, but traveled extensively to several Arab Gulf States, Russia, Europe, and the United States [Note: Turajonzoda's lifestyle and political philosophy seemed heavily influenced by his time spent abroad. A muted plasma screen TV tuned to Al-Jazeera news played continuously during our meeting, and he repeatedly compared Tajikistan's political environment to that of several other countries. End note.] After returning to Tajikistan in 1998, he served as Deputy Prime Minister for seven years. Upon his resignation in 2005, he was chosen to serve as one of only eight presidentially appointed Deputies in the Majlisi Milli. In this position, Turajonzoda may revise drafts of laws from the Majlisi Namoyandagon, Tajikistan's lower parliamentary house. His appointment to the Majlisi Milli was reportedly the result of a gentlemen's agreement between Turajonzoda and President Rahmon; in exchange for the Deputy job, Turajonzoda agreed that he would not challenge Rahmon for the presidency. Turajonzoda also manages a personal business investing in local cotton farms.

RECENT CLASHES "NOT DOMESTIC PROBLEMS"

¶13. (C) On July 30, a meeting between Turajonzoda and State Deprtment vistors from the DRL bureau began with a discussion of recent armed attacks on police checkpoints in the Tavildara area of central Tajikistan. Turajonzoda noted that no armed group had made an official statement regarding its identity or intentions, but asserted that several armed opposition groups were currently operating near Tavildara. At least one of these groups was comprised of militants from Afghanistan and Pakistan, and another of former opposition fighters from Tajikistan's civil war. Turajonzoda predicted that clashes would continue for the foreseeable future, but expected there would not be widespread support for the groups. Most Tajiks had painful memories of the civil war, and feared any outbreak of violence.

¶14. (C) Turajonzoda dismissed two small explosions in Dushanbe on July 26, as the work of Tajikistan's security service. He believed the explosions were intended to demonstrate Tajikistan's security relevance to Presidents Karzai, Zardari, and Medvedev ahead of a summit of regional leaders in Dushanbe last week.

TAJIKISTAN'S POLITICAL FUTURE

¶15. (C) Turajonzoda compared Tajikistan's current political environment to other countries, particularly Egypt. Asked if Rahmon would ever lose control of Tajikistan, Turajonzoda replied, "Look at Mubarak." He explained that both leaders were unpopular among their people, but maintained control over their

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populations by crushing any prospects for democratic transition. He commented that democracy allowed India to avoid problems with religious extremism [sic].

¶16. (C) Turajonzoda expressed doubt that democratic reform would occur in Tajikistan. Similarly, a coup or revolution would not change Tajikistan's political system; it would only result in a "change of dictators." The only solution, he claimed, was for the United Nations Security Council to mandate that world leaders serve no more than 10 years, since "no one can become a dictator in 10 years."

¶17. (C) Asked what he expected of Tajikistan's parliamentary elections in February 2010, Turajonzoda shook his head and said, "They are false." Still, he predicted the election would be peaceful, since people are "afraid of mutiny" even if they hated Rahmon. In response to a question about whether recent protests in Iran over that country's presidential election might inspire similar demonstrations in Tajikistan, Turajonzoda replied, "Iran did not have a civil war." Referring to Mir-Hossein Mousavi, President Ahmadinejad's primary contender in Iran's election, he said such candidates would have been jailed or killed in Tajikistan for inciting unrest.

"NO RESPECT FOR ISLAM"

¶18. (C) Turajonzoda had much to say about Tajikistan's new law on religion (Ref A), which many observers have criticized as being overly restrictive of religious practice and association. He alleged that when the law was passed, the government secretly

instructed police not to enforce it strictly. The law was intended to be a signaling mechanism, he said; to "let the world know we are secular." According to Turajonzoda, most Muslim leaders in Tajikistan are opposed to the idea of an Islamic state and sought only the spread of Islamic ideals within Tajik society. He criticized Rahmon for failing to understand this, saying the President had "no respect for Islam."

¶9. (C) Pointing to frustration among the country's youth over the lack of economic opportunity and an inability to express themselves, Turajonzoda predicted that a growing number of Tajik youth would become extremists. He cited the now-banned Salafi movement as evidence that young people were beginning to turn toward more conservative forms of Islam, calling them "youth gone astray." He expects the situation to worsen as Tajiks' violent memories of the civil war fade. By his estimation, the possibility of an opposition-led coup would be much higher in 15-20 years. He did not specify whether such an opposition would be Islamist or secular in nature.

VIEWS OF AMERICA

¶10. (C) Turajonzoda offered several warnings for U.S. policy in Tajikistan. He predicted that if the Taliban was not defeated in Afghanistan, instability would spread rapidly to Tajikistan. He also noted that a growing number of Tajiks believed the United States was insincere in its desire to promote democracy here. "People only see things in two colors," he cautioned, indicating that Tajiks would not take America seriously unless it ceased support for Rahmon. Warning that it was unwise to back "those who do not care about their people," Turajonzoda asked why the United States had not been more forceful in urging Rahmon to release Tajik opposition prisoners jailed during the civil war.

¶11. (C) Overall, Turajonzoda expressed a positive opinion of the United States. He praised America's attitude toward Islam and religious freedom, saying at one point, "When I was in America, I saw Islam. Here, I do not." He also praised the Embassy for sending five Tajik imams to the United States in May under the

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IVLP (Ref B). According to Turajonzoda, such programs are the best way to counter the threat of extremism and anti-American sentiment in Tajikistan.

COMMENT

¶12. (C) Turajonzoda was forthcoming with his opinions, even on potentially sensitive issues. Our meeting with him highlighted his unique role in Tajikistan's opaque political system. He is one of very few former opposition leaders to obtain multiple presidential appointments after the civil war. Unlike the others, however, he makes his dislike for Rahmon public. As the "gentlemen's agreement" between Turajonzoda and Rahmon suggests, Rahmon prefers to keep Turajonzoda in his government as a means of restraining Turajonzoda's political clout. Though Turajonzoda seems happy with this arrangement for now, many Tajiks believe he may be biding his time and waiting for an auspicious moment in which to seek the presidency himself.

QUAST